

East Providence welcomes landmark Cape Verdean museum



EAST PROVIDENCE - Cape Verdeans have a long history in America, especially New England, yet to date, no museum exists that specifically chronicles Cape Verdean history and culture. That is, with the exception of East Providence.

Those on the board of the Cape Verdean Museum, located at 1003 Waterman Ave., which is slated to officially open on March 25, believe theirs is the only museum of its kind in the entire country. And to that end, they are working hard to make sure their culture is properly represented.

Key points of Cape Verdean heritage include the July 7 celebration of Cape Verde's independence from Portugal, which occurred in 1975, and a family-centered culture.

On their own

The museum had its official grand opening in October, 2005. Initially, the idea was for the museum to be part of the Heritage Harbor Museum, but when plans for the museum did not come to fruition, the board struck out on their own.

"The community was still behind us," said Denise Oliveira, of the board of directors.

"We wanted to tell our own story and do it with a Cape Verdean board of directors," said Yvonne Smart, one of the members of the board.

Other Rhode Island board members include Elizabeth A'Vant, Linda A'Vant-Deishinni, Len Cabral, Miguel Lopes, Mary Monteiro, Monty G. Monteiro, Denise A. Oliveira, Isadore S. Ramos, Jeanne Tavares-Valles and Diana Vieira.

Four other individuals hail from Connecticut and Massachusetts.

One of the highlights of the project so far has been the Cape Verdean Hall of Fame, which had its inaugural awards ceremony and banquet in November. Daniel Silva Lima, George S. Lima, Manuel Ricardo Martin, Ivo Pires, Romana H. Ramos and Antonia Ignacia Ramalho Sequeira were inducted. Inductees are chosen based on nomination and criteria that includes ancestry and works done that bring credit to the Cape Verdean heritage.

"We represent all of New England," said Ms. Smart, who said that for a community with a prominent Cape Verdean population, it is important for residents to know the history.

"Even to our own people, it hasn't always been told," she said.

So it begins

The story begins with Cape Verdeans coming to the United States in the 18th century and taking up in the whaling profession. They came primarily to New England and settled in the New Bedford and Fox Point areas, first the men, then their families, establishing community and eventually coming to East Providence. From the marine industry, Cape Verdeans branched out into longshoreman and factory professions, and then moved to the cranberry industry, bringing over even more workers from Cape Verde. The union for longshoremen was started by Cape Verdeans.

East Providence also has a rich history with the Cape Verdean culture. According to Mr. Ramos, East Providence native Peter Coelho was the first Cape Verdean to be elected as a State House representative for a district of the city, and Mr. Ramos was the first Cape Verdean to be elected across the whole city, as a school committee member. When he taught at the high school, he said, 90 percent of the people of color were Cape Verdean.

In the museum

The museum contains original artifacts from those times, including cranberry scoops and pictures of whalers. Other cultural exhibitions include mortar and pestles, cloth, beadwork and baskets. Panos, cloths used in the slave trade and still sold today, are on exhibition in older and newer forms. Folk art and paintings are also on display, along with music exhibits.

The museum should be open on March 25. From there, the board plans to start off slow, possibly with a three-day-a-week schedule and Saturday hours. They will also open for school groups, and do not plan to charge admission, though donations are welcomed.

Look to the Post for more information on the museum's operating hours and exhibits.

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